

Women Leaders: Overcoming Impostor Syndrome in Higher Education in Kazakhstan

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While impostor syndrome has attracted considerable scholarly interest in the Global North, in the context of Kazakhstan, it was mainly discussed on popular social outlets. This paper explores whether female leaders in higher education in Kazakhstan have experienced impostor feelings and if so, how -if at all- they overcame it. To explore it, a narrative approach was used to interview ten female leaders working in universities of Kazakhstan. Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the participants' experience. This first study on Imposter Syndrome in Kazakhstan shows that almost all women leaders face these problems. Based on their experience of impostor syndrome, the participants provided recommendations to help cope with it.

Keywords: impostor syndrome, impostor phenomenon, female leadership, higher education leadership

INTRODUCTION

Impostor syndrome (also known as 'impostor phenomenon') is defined as a behavioural pattern. Usually, it expresses feelings of having reached senior positions not because of merit or personal achievement but because of support of influential guardians or due to absolute luck (Feenstra et al., 2020). Bravata et al. (2020) explain that "imposter syndrome is a [*condition*] that describes high-achieving individuals who, despite their objective successes, fail to internalize their accomplishments and have [*persistent*] self-doubt and fear of being exposed as a fraud or imposter" (p. 12). The terms 'impostor syndrome' and 'impostor phenomenon' have been used interchangeably in previous literature. The study of Bravata et al. (2019) noted that nearly all scholarly literature used the term 'impostor phenomenon', while lay literature used 'impostor syndrome'. In this paper, it is referred to as 'impostor syndrome' since in the Kazakhstani media, it is well known as 'impostor syndrome' rather than 'impostor phenomenon'.

The topic of Impostor Syndrome has recently drawn a lot of attention among women in Kazakhstani social media. A possible reason for this could be the rapid changes in Kazakhstan (Yessentay et al., 2021), such as the active promotion of gender equality (Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2021). To put it differently, Kazakhstan, after gaining its independence, has witnessed a rapid transition from a socialist society to a neoliberal value system (Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017), with specific views on women's social and professional roles, including women and leadership; and a simultaneous re-emergence of traditional norms, values, and gender expectations (Kandiyoti, 2007). Consequently, women are confronted with competing societal standards and expectations regarding their responsibilities in the family and work contexts (Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017), which to some extent forces them to become 'Superwomen' or 'Superheroes' (Young 2011).

There are two main reasons to investigate impostor syndrome in the higher education context in Kazakhstan. First, numerous studies reported the predominance of the impostor syndrome in higher education across students, faculty, and managing personnel populations (Parkman, 2016). Second, although the field of education is generally considered female-dominated when it comes to leadership, the sector is still dominated by men (Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2017). For example, in their study, Kuzhabekova and Almukhambetova (2021) found that female employees in the universities were described as “being more detail-oriented, responsible, and hard-working” (p. 109). However, they must work harder in order to achieve the same position as men because they have to balance their professional and family duties. Kuzhabekova and Almukhambetova (2021) mentioned that female employees were also described as someone who set “high expectations for themselves” (p. 109), which is common for people who tend to experience impostor syndrome (Young, 2011).

This is the first study to investigate the experience of imposterous feelings among female leaders in Kazakhstan. The work, thus, generates fresh insights into impostor syndrome from a non-Western perspective. According to Bravata et al. (2019), most studies were conducted in the USA, Canada, Germany, Belgium, and the UK. Studies conducted outside of North America and Europe include Iran, Korea, and India. The findings should contribute to understanding how *female leaders* experience impostor syndrome and providing possible solutions for overcoming it.

FEMALE LEADERSHIP IN KAZAKHSTAN

Based on the statistics by Ranking.kz (2022), women in Kazakhstan constitute a substantial proportion of the labor market. Specifically, 48.5% of the economically active population are women. They also make up 48.1% of all people employed in the country (Ranking.kz, 2022). Not only do women actively participate in the country's economic development, but they also have demonstrated an improvement in tertiary education attainment. According to a recent report by the Bureau of National Statistics (2021), in Kazakhstan, undergraduate and graduate female representation is equal to, if not greater than, male representation; however, the same cannot be said for doctoral completion, tenured professor status, and senior administration roles. It can be, however, noticed that women's leadership chances in the workplace have increased in recent decades (Redmond et al., 2017). For instance, since its independence, Kazakhstan announced a decree on gender equality achievement (Kuzhabekova et al., 2018). As a result of this decree, Kazakhstan has joined the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women. It has ratified the Convention on the Political Rights of Women (Kuzhabekova et al., 2018).

Additionally, various international treaties related to civil, economic, political, and socio-cultural rights have been adopted (Kuzhabekova et al., 2018). In 2003, the government accepted the Concept of Gender Policy, whose main agenda includes increasing female representation in decision-making positions across different fields (Kuzhabekova et al., 2018). The concept also seeks to achieve balanced participation of men and women in power structures, provide equal opportunities for women's economic independence, entrepreneurship, and career development, and create conditions for the equal exercise of rights and responsibilities in the family. Furthermore, several commissions, such as the Association of Business Women in Kazakhstan and the National Commission for Women and the Family, have been founded in the last decade, suggesting the emergence of concerted attempts to address the issue of female participation in leadership (Kuzhabekova et al., 2018).

Despite the remarkable initiatives and achievements, there is still concern that women are underrepresented at the top levels of leadership across sectors and industries (Kuzhabekova et al., 2018), including higher education, where women are overrepresented in lower-paid professions but are still underrepresented at the top (Kuzhabekova & Almukhambetova, 2021). For example, in Kazakhstan, only 24% of decision-making positions in universities in 2019 were filled by women (Martynova et al., 2020), approximately equal to the global average (Times Higher Education, 2021).

With women accounting for most university students in recent years, it is reasonable to wonder why their representation in leadership roles in the higher education domain, especially in executive roles, is dwindling at each stage of the leadership ladder. This *leaky pipeline* has been the subject of extensive

investigation, which indicates that it is a multidimensional issue (Vaughn et al., 2020). Previous studies have determined structural problems, family responsibilities, gender discrimination, self-esteem, and the impostor syndrome as the main hindrances for women to advance in the tertiary workforce (Martynova et al., 2020; Redmond et al., 2017; Vaughn et al., 2020). In this paper, we focus particularly on the latter issue, namely the impostor syndrome.

IMPOSTOR SYNDROME

The concept of ‘impostor syndrome’ (IS) was first introduced by Clance and Imes in 1978 (Vaughn et al., 2020) as a widespread psychological feeling of perceived professional and intellectual fraudulence (Paterson & Vincent-Akpu, 2021). It is described as an adverse internal emotional condition focusing on feelings of ambiguity, incapability, and inadequacy or as a conviction of inability despite the evidence of the opposite (LaVelle et al., 2022). The term was coined after Clance and Imes (1978) noticed the tendency among numerous successful women to regularly undermine their competencies, and believe that they were over-evaluated by others (Paterson & Vincent-Akpu, 2021). Irrespective of workplace discipline, some studies demonstrate that approximately 70% of people experience IS at some point in their career, when they attribute their accomplishments to luck or external forces and which makes them to be preoccupied with fears of being exposed as incapable (LaVelle et al., 2022). Moreover, 75% of women on executive positions across a range of industries reported that they personally experienced impostor syndrome (KPMG US, 2022). Despite the fact that IS can be identified in various fields, the majority of studies on IS have been registered in the context of higher education because IS was originally defined as *high achievers’* experiences of intellectual fraudulence or phoniness (Cokley et al., 2015). The studies particularly focused on graduate students, medical residents, early career academics, and faculty members (Hutchins & Rainbolt, 2017), because these professions are associated with *being competitive and successful* (Maji, 2021). Although the university campus is regarded as a peaceful haven where academic communities come together to seek and exchange knowledge in a welcoming setting, the reality is often significantly different (Parkman, 2016). Shreffler et al. (2020) believe that extremely competitive and stressful university environments may cause impostor tendencies.

Various reasons may provoke imposterous feelings in higher education. For instance, Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017) found that university employees felt imposterous when they were questioned regarding their expertise by colleagues and comparison of themselves with their colleagues. Besides the professional environment, factors such as demography, culture, familial relationship, and beliefs may also play a role in antecedents (Gómez-Morales, 2021). Another cause for IS might be when an individual is considered representative of the entire social group (Young, 2011). For instance, a woman must make unusual efforts to succeed without any failure. In case of failure, society tends to say that the whole female population cannot succeed and not that particular woman, which also applies to other minority groups (Young, 2011).

People highly susceptible to IS usually attribute their successes to chance, human mistake, or favorable external influences and are cognitively and emotionally concerned about being discovered and revealed as inept (Maji, 2021). This difficulty with internal attribution is often connected to procrastination, overpreparing and hardworking, self-sabotage, maintaining a low or ever-changing profile, and perfectionism (Young, 2011). The impostor syndrome is neither a clinical nor a psychological disorder because it has not been listed as such in the American Psychiatric Association’s Diagnostic and Statistical Manual. However, it may impede an individual’s mental well-being (Paterson & Vincent-Akpu, 2021). The debilitating effects of IS on mental health include general anxiety, social anxiety, emotional exhaustion, burnout, self-defeating behavior, dysphoric mood disorder, and dissatisfaction in both professional and personal contexts (Maji, 2021; LaVelle et al., 2022). As a result of severe IS presence, people often may have serious depression, damaged self-esteem and self-identity, loss of motivation, rejection of positive feedback, and communication difficulties (Freeman & Peisah, 2022). Because impostor syndrome is a negative emotional state, those who experience it tend to attempt to hide its presence and effects through developing and maintaining defensive behavior and personalities (LaVelle et al., 2022). Depending on

various defense mechanisms, there are several types of impostor syndrome, such as the Perfectionist, the Natural Genius, the Expert, the Individualist, and the Superhero (Hofmann, 2022).

Each archetype possesses specific characteristics that demonstrate that every individual experiencing IS differs from each other. For example, Young (2011) explains that the main focus of the Perfectionist is *how* something is done. Preferably things should be done perfectly due to their unrealistically high standards. Like the Perfectionist, the Natural Genius sets an extremely high internal bar. However, instead of assessing flawlessness, they measure themselves based on speed and easiness. The Natural Genius is expected to know things without being taught, advance without extra effort, and perform correctly on the first try. In other words, they believe that if a person is intelligent, they can understand everything immediately.

While the Natural Genius considers intelligence and ability as innate traits, the Experts, on the contrary, emphasise *how much* knowledge and skills one may have. The Experts also believe that a certain threshold of knowledge and experience should be passed to become expert *enough*. Individualists spend years working on the misconception that true competence equals unaided accomplishment *on their own*. If the Perfectionists prefer functioning by themselves to control the quality of the tasks, the Individualists believe that they should not need support and help from others. In their opinion, the only accomplishment that really counts is the one reached all on their own. Hence, if a person is competent enough, they can do everything individually. For a Superhero, the importance lies not in performing flawlessly in one activity but in juggling various roles masterfully. Nevertheless, they probably have some perfectionist tendencies since their competence depends not only on how *many* things they can do, but on how *well they do them*. Young (2011) also notes that, unlike other types, a Superhero is predominantly a cultural creation. It emerged as the traditional roles of mother and housewife were expanded to integrate the additional role of full-time worker. Suddenly, *having everything* became *doing everything* (Young, 2011).

Hutchins and Rainbolt (2017) confirm that IS is not exceptional to a specific culture but extends across various nationalities that approach career as the essence of success. Although the results of gender differences in feeling imposterous are mixed (Bravata et al., 2020), the IS is usually linked to women and representatives of ethnic minorities (Young, 2011) both in academic literature and social media outlets (Feenstra et al., 2020). Paterson and Vincent-Akpu (2021) explain it as women's tendency to feel that external factors such as luck or appropriate timing are responsible for success. Famous examples are former First Lady Michelle Obama and Chief Operating Officer of Facebook Sheryl Sandberg, who both admitted to feeling like frauds (Feenstra et al., 2020).

METHODOLOGY

Research Approach

To develop a qualitative understanding of the female leaders' experience of impostor syndrome, the current paper employs a narrative inquiry as an underlying methodological approach. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), a narrative inquiry is an ideal option for collecting a single person's detailed stories or life experiences or a small group of people. Clandinin (2013) defines narrative inquiry as an encompassing concept that incorporates the activities involved in producing, analyzing, and re-presenting life stories (Stride et al., 2017). As a result, narrative inquiry can be considered a methodology that analyses gathered data (personal stories) and interprets the text in the form of stories (Figgou & Pavlopoulos, 2015). This method is thought to give researchers access to people's personalities and life experiences of particular circumstances (Scheytt et al., 2003), which is one of the main goals of the present paper. Bruckmüller et al. (2014) state that it is crucial to understand what women experience while advancing to leadership roles. Their stories may inspire other women to find ways of overcoming the impostor syndrome. Additionally, this method allows readers to look at people's lives through the prism of a story, honoring lived experience as a valuable source of information (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). To allow this process, interviews were conducted with ten women who advanced to executive positions in higher education management.

Participant Selection, Data Collection, and Data Analysis

Ten women with executive experience were invited to participate in a one-hour semi-structured open-ended interview and consented to participate in this interview. Calls for participants were announced through personal social media accounts such as Instagram, Facebook, and LinkedIn. After posting information, friends and colleagues started tagging potential respondents in the comment section. Overall, 24 women from all social media tags combined have been contacted. Additionally, four people have messaged me through personal messengers. Of 28 interview candidates, 10 ten agreed to participate and signed a consent form. The process of data collection started after the study was approved by the university's privacy and ethics committee.

The selection criteria of participants included professional experience in leading positions in Kazakhstani universities. It was also important to have participants from regional, national, international, and private universities hear stories from manifold contexts. There were no requirements for participants in terms of their age, years of professional experience in the top management, and ethnic belonging, considering the small ratio of female executives in Higher Education in general. The reason for selecting women that advanced in their careers lies in the association of impostor syndrome with high-achieving women.

The study by Mak et al. (2019) demonstrates that previous research mainly employed the Clance Impostor Phenomenon Scale (CIPS), which was created to measure the extent to which people believe their success depends on external factors. The CIPS is a Likert scale comprising 20 statements with responses ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree) and measures three subscale items: *Fake*, *Discount*, and *Luck*. Questions from the *Fake* subscale measure self-doubt and concerns regarding ability and intelligence. Items from *Discount* evaluate the respondents' opinions about the incapacity to recognize and admit good performance. *Luck* items measure beliefs of having achievements as a result of luck, mistake, or error compared to ability.

Despite its popularity in use, it was decided to eschew this survey due to certain reasons. First, the aim of this paper is to elaborate on individuals' life experiences through their stories and not focusing on the total scores of the survey. Second, CIPS focuses on attributing success to the external environment only; however, several defence mechanisms and behaviours can also demonstrate the level of IS presence (Hofmann, 2022). Finally, because CIPS explicitly discusses the presence of IS, there were concerns about possible biased responses. For example, participants who are aware of IS and would not like to share their internal and emotional issues may avoid certain questions or falsify their answers. Due to the concerns above, semi-structured open-ended interviews were selected as an alternative tool for data collection.

Semi-structured interviews allow researchers to organise and guide the conversation between participant and interviewer based on the topic (Ravitch & Carl, 2021). It includes specific and tailored clarifying questions during the interview process and provides room for respondents' spontaneous narratives and descriptions (Figgou & Pavlopoulos, 2015; Ravitch & Carl, 2021). Interview question lines focused on the challenges female leaders experience during their professional journey, identifying the presence of impostor syndrome, how did they overcome the syndrome and what would they recommend to combat it, and what are their attitudes towards impostor syndrome as well. Questions related to IS were taken from those provided by Hofmann (2022) and Young (2011). However, their questions are closed-ended, which would not allow for elaborate responses. Therefore, those questions were adapted to open-ended ones. For example, instead of asking, "are you a perfectionist?", it was asked "to what extent do you identify yourself as a perfectionist?". This could provide space for participants to go in depth in their answers and for researchers to arrange follow-up questions.

The procedure of data analysis began after all interviews had been collected and transcribed verbatim. Transcriptions were analyzed using the principles of narrative analysis, which refers to a method of text interpretation in the form of stories (Figgou & Pavlopoulos, 2015). A general assumption of this approach is that individuals share stories to help arrange and make sense of their lived experiences, which are considered useful and purposeful (Figgou & Pavlopoulos, 2015). Thematic content analysis, which refers to *what a story is about*, was used to explore patterns within the narratives. The themes were connected to the general research objectives which is to explore IS experience among female leaders in the Kazakhstani

universities and how they overcame it. As most participants are in decision-making positions and well-known in their inner professional circles, their names were pseudonymized and workplaces were coded to protect confidentiality.

FINDINGS

Impostor Syndrome Among Female Leaders in Kazakhstan

The majority of respondents explicitly shared having imposterous feelings while talking about challenges in their workplaces or outside of it. The tendency to feel imposterous differs occasionally and depends on particular situations. Sometimes, it occurs when starting a new position in a completely different environment or when they feel that responsibilities become more routine and do not challenge them enough. For example, Claire says she started experiencing impostor syndrome more often when she recently quit her 9-5 job at the university and started a new chapter of her life as a freelancer. She is often concerned about her knowledge and skillsets and asks, "Am I really capable of doing this? I don't have a degree in this domain. What if my level is not good enough?". Even though Claire, after reflecting on the past, concludes that her level was never *not enough*, occasionally she asks those questions again. Amelie's experience of IS seems to be similar. In her experience, she starts doubting if she really deserves the position every two to three years and starts searching for a new place. Moreover, she believes that IS is the reason why she often changes her workplace. However, Michele, Pearl, and Beatrice possess the opposite experience. They used to feel imposterous more when they were at the beginning of their career back in the day. Three of them say that after getting the first degree, they felt they should not be working there, and someone else would be better. Their explanation lies in the difference between the knowledge obtained from the university and actual professional life inside the same system. Now that they gained remarkable professional experience, there tends to be mild. In Eline's case, she often compares her achievements to those of others without recognizing or acknowledging her own. She says:

Recently, I was having dinner with a rector from a well-known university. He invited his partners from American companies. They are cool lawyers from New York. When they told me "Wow, you're so cool. You're the director of the whole business school, tell us more", it seemed to me as mockery. Those guys are doing cool things in New York holding degrees from Harvard. I really felt like I'm an impostor and I'm pretending to be someone who I am not.

Unlike Eline, Amanda does not compare herself to others, but she also witnesses constant doubts of herself despite her impressive career. In her opinion, people have the wrong impression of her:

They say "oh, you achieved so many things. You can do this as well". And I'm like "Can I? Maybe I can't. What if I can't?". They all think I can, but I can't. It's all a lie. It all seems possible from outside, but in reality, it's not.

Amanda thinks that it is common for people to search for weaknesses in themselves. She also adds that the more advanced a person has in their career the more intense feelings of self-distrust and self-sabotage one may have. Self-doubt and self-sabotaging often happen to Pearl as well, especially in terms of bigger projects. The larger the project, the more people are involved, the more fear of failure binds her. When she experiences fear, her defensive reaction is to procrastinate and do something else. As Amanda, Kyra believes that no one is insured from the impostor syndrome. Especially those who had an experience of being perfectionists in the past, which can be evident from the responses of all participants. All these women have in common their perfect academic performance since childhood. In this regard Yolanda and Julia say that since elementary school they always had excellent grades and graduated from university with honour.

Moreover, most of these female leaders earned their degrees abroad in prestigious universities while being scholarship holders. Further, in life, Yolanda and Julia always tried to demonstrate a 100%

performance saying, “if you started, finish it. Preferably in a perfect manner, so we don’t need to come back to it. I don’t have any unfinished projects”. What Youlanda said is related to almost all participants’ responses.

Dealing With and Overcoming the Impostor Syndrome

In response to the imposterous feelings throughout their personal and professional lives, female leaders identified several strategies to cope with IS that further helped to overcome it to some extent. The most prevalent response on how to deal with impostor syndrome was the help of family and friends. Almost all women mentioned the importance of their friends and family’s recognition and support. For example, Amelie says:

Whenever I feel useless, I just shoot a message to my friends saying “oh, I can’t do this or that. I’m useless”. Most of the time they respond like “come on, what are you saying?! You’re the best at what you’re doing, keep going”. It helps.

Eline mentioned how her family’s acknowledgement helped her to understand her real worth:

In almost 30 years, my mom recently said “it turned out, I didn’t know you so much, but, apparently, you’re *really krutaya* and doing awesome things. I’ve just learnt that what you’re doing is really *kruto* and important for society”. It turned out that recognition of the closest people lets you know your real worth.

In Claire’s case, her husband is the main supporter:

My husband supports me a lot, because he says “Claire, it seems to me it’s only you who doubts yourself. All people around you have never doubted you”. Actually, it’s him and his calmness that made me move forward. He’s my only support. Why? Because I don’t share my fears with anyone else, except for him. Whenever I feel fear, I tell him “I’m scared. I don’t know. I think I’d do wrong or won’t be able to do”. Then he starts reasoning with me like why I think that way. He’s a person of pure logic too and we start considering various scenarios of what could happen.

Family members and friends can provide emotional support, as can colleagues and individuals from their professional communities. In situations when Michele feels overwhelmed or doubts her expertise, she reaches her professional community for support. She can discuss with her companions whether she does not understand her field or whether a person she conversed with made her feel inept. Likewise, Amanda has a couple of former and current colleagues whom she can approach and who know her as a professional. She believes that it is essential to have someone who can evaluate her skills based on her previous accomplishments and can say, “What you have done before is not more difficult or easier than this. You have done similar things, so you can do this even if it seems harder”. Amanda calls them a *reality check people*.

Besides the support of family, friends, and peers, there are various other ways to overcome impostor syndrome. For example, participants practice mindfulness, working with emotions, finding alternative interests, and self-appraisal. Yolanda believes that thirty minutes of meditation daily helps to keep her mind in harmony. During the meditation, she can free her mind from all concerns and doubts that afterward she feels more grateful and can focus on what she has in the present. When Eline and Amelie realize that imposterous feelings are approaching, they try to reflect on their emotions. For example, they ask themselves, “What am I feeling now? What makes me feel like this? Is this feeling destructive or not? Can I control it?”. They say that sometimes rational thinking should be over emotions to be able to handle ambiguous and unknown feelings. Claire, Pearl, and Amelie also suggest looking back occasionally. It means that reflecting and listing all previous accomplishments enable them to understand and see what their

capabilities are and what kind of challenges they could complete. Moreover, Amelie digitised all her achievements:

I created my own portfolio. Not just a resume listing where I worked, but portfolio, which helped me to realise my worth on the job market. I made a digital version and included all the projects that I successfully completed and current qualification certificates, listed all my digital skills and attached examples of my works. It's like a mini-website. I constantly correct and update it. That helps me to understand how competitive and valuable I am on the job market. It also makes me satisfied with myself.

Attitudes Toward Impostor Syndrome

Not only is it important how to cope with and overcome the impostor syndrome, but it is also essential to know and understand how one approaches it. Participants' responses on their attitudes towards self-doubt and questioning their skills were somewhat mixed. However, the majority of them considered the mild presence of IS as a driver and not only as a burden. Indeed, they shared that IS may cause certain emotional difficulties, but changing the approach, it can be useful for self-development. Participants demonstrated their appreciative approach, emphasizing that experiencing impostor syndrome to some extent would be beneficial for an individual. Because it is impossible to avoid feeling imposterous, as Amanda and Kyra said before, one should be able to become friends with it. As a result of an appreciative approach, it may encourage them to learn and investigate new fields, to leave their comfort zones, and develop creative thinking. Claire explains it as:

... [Y]ou should approach impostor syndrome [as a magic wand, actually]. In other words, it's important to understand that without it, you won't be able to move forward. And a person who doesn't experience impostor syndrome is actually a dabbler. It's absolutely okay to feel out of place from time to time when you do something new. It should be uncomfortable. If you feel comfortable, it means you reached the peak, where stagnation starts.

Eline has a similar statement:

... [I]t helps because you don't want to experience these negative emotions. In order to not to experience it, you start backing up your positions with education, interesting research, and interesting projects, so you'll have something to be able to engage in conversation. That's why in this case, I think that impostor syndrome is a driver.

In addition to leaving the comfort zone, impostor syndrome can stimulate creative thinking. Beatrice says:

Sometimes education is not enough to accomplish certain tasks. I think it is important to be able to find creative approaches. Even if you don't know something. At least in my domain, I think I could be safe many times because of creative thinking. In a sense that I could find various alternative ways to complete the tasks. It shouldn't necessarily be a common and generally-accepted way of doing things. You can always create your own way of solving problems and accomplishing tasks.

For Amelie, it is a period when she can listen to herself, and it is a sign that she should stop, breathe, and observe her inner-self and desires. While Amelie focuses on herself, Yolanda, Julia, and Kyra consider impostor syndrome as a motivation to accept new challenges. They point out that whenever they question their abilities, they first try to prove that the impossible is possible. Despite the outcome of their actions, at least they can learn from their mistakes, which is more valuable than not knowing potential capabilities.

Recommendations in Overcoming the Impostor Syndrome

Participants acknowledge that being a female leader in Kazakhstan present challenges due to society's controversial expectations. It is inevitable to question oneself and feel concerned about one's background, skills, and knowledge at some point in life, whether personal, academic, or professional. However, it does not necessarily mean being encircled by self-doubts, self-sabotage, and fear of failure. Drawing from their experience with impostor syndrome and overpowering it, female leaders offered several recommendations to help combat the insecurities caused by impostor syndrome.

The most commonly recommended approach is to have *reality check people* who can provide genuine assistance. These should be people who possess not only the eagerness, but also enough knowledge and abilities to give an objective assessment, such as former or current employers and colleagues. Those people have known a person professionally and can frankly share their opinions regarding one's capability.

The second common piece of advice is to have a *role model*, a *mentor*, and a *coach*. Claire and Pearl refer to role models as someone by whom one can be inspired instead of copying the person's lifestyle and personality traits. Claire explains:

Having a role model doesn't mean "I will be like her". No. Not in habits. Not in behaviour. It should be done more like "okay, this person obtained this degree to work there. Then she could get this and that". Role models should inspire through their biography.

Both Pearl and Claire explain that having someone close to the field one would like to improve in is better. For example, someone older, with extensive experience in the field, or in a senior position. When role models inspire someone, a mentor can provide advice that would help with new challenges and encourage development in personal or professional lives. In short, a mentor's role is to motivate, encourage, and help if necessary. Michele recommends coaching as well. She believes that sessions with coaches can facilitate overcoming challenges through specific coaching instruments. Unlike mentoring, coaching focuses on achieving well-defined goals instead of general development. Participants advise getting inspired by role models, emotional support from mentors, and professional support from coaches.

Indeed, mentors and coaches can assist when the impostor syndrome is present moderately. In case of severe consequences of impostor syndrome, respondents recommend contacting psychologists. Eline states, "... if it's severe anxiety, then better to contact a psychologist and work on the issues". Kyra suggests making sure that he or she is a professional psychologist and not someone pretending to be on social media. Moreover, Yolanda believes that mental health professionals can help understand oneself and raise awareness of one's true self, which may further assist in accepting an individual's traits. "Having a therapist is useful when someone cannot or is afraid of sharing her emotions and fears with friends and family because of possible judgments from their side," adds Julia. Pearl confirms Yolanda and Julia's statements, adding that therapy sessions with a psychologist greatly helped her. Consequently, her close friends and colleagues noticed positive changes in her behaviour and general attitude.

Last but not least, participants propose tracking their own achievements. According to respondents, leaders tend to forget or ignore previous accomplishments, focusing only on the fear of failure. For this reason, they suggest writing down and listing what they have done previously and reflecting on how they could reach the position where they are now. The optimal way is to create a portfolio. Amelie states:

If you can't afford coaching, the easier way is to have your portfolio of achievements. You need to show your baggage of experience, knowledge, and skills, to understand how and why you are there. Sometimes, if you don't show it, no one will get it. First of all, this portfolio helps to realise your worth to *yourself*.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This study aimed to investigate impostor syndrome amongst Kazakhstani female leaders in higher education, explore their way to overcome the behavioural pattern, and identify their general attitude towards

the syndrome. The current study found that there are several reasons why participants experienced impostor syndrome. Usually, it depends on a specific contextual occasion. An example could be when they started a new career track or, on the contrary, when they experienced no challenge at the workplace, if they tend to compare themselves with someone else, or have constant general doubt of self, which supports the research conducted by LaDonna et al. (2018). Based on the participants' responses, it can be concluded that imposterous feeling is common experiences across career trajectories. Moreover, a leadership position does not necessarily guarantee a safe spot from impostor syndrome. This finding corroborates the results of the previous work in identifying the impostor syndrome among the female population in higher education. To support this, the study by Vaughn et al. (2020) demonstrated the existence of IS in women at all university levels: from fresh graduate students to senior administrators. The research also confirms that feeling imposterous is common, particularly for female leaders as the report from KPMG US (2022) provided. As a result of impostor syndrome, individuals tend to display the tendency of self-distrust, self-sabotage, and procrastination. An explanation for the tendency to postpone tasks might be those persons with IS in general, aim for perfectionism, but they adopt such defensive behaviour to avoid any failures. In other words, as Rohrmann et al. (2016) mentioned, they take the position of "if I don't try it, I cannot fail" (p. 8). Another possible explanation is that when individuals acquire excellent outcomes after postponing the task, it is easier to attribute their success to external factors such as luck.

The report by Arleo et al. (2021) has shown that recognizing impostor syndrome is the first step in confronting it. Likewise, the current paper's findings demonstrated that to overcome impostor syndrome, it is essential to identify its severity. To understand the degree of impostor syndrome, one should ask themselves questions such as what prompts this feeling, how it makes them feel, and why it is happening now. Therefore, depending on the severity, specific actions can be performed to deal with it. For example, when the presence is mild, individuals can track their own accomplishments both on paper and digitally, search for mentors and coaches (Hutchins et al., 2018) and seek support from friends and family (Kardashian & May, 2019). Respondents' recommendation on finding mentors and coaches reflects those of Zanchetta et al. (2020) who also found that coaching intervention significantly reduced IS presence across all participants. Moreover, coaching effect tends to increase over time, making the intervention sustainable (Zanchetta et al., 2020). Suppose one's experience of impostor syndrome causes negative cognitive and emotional burdens such as severe anxiety and depression. In that case, it is better to treat with the help of formal psychotherapy and other psychiatric practices (Arleo et al., 2021).

The most interesting and unexpected finding to emerge from the analysis was the participants' positive approach toward impostor syndrome. From female leaders' responses, it can be noticed that they consider impostor syndrome as an inevitable feeling and, at the same time, a driver that can assist in self-improvement. In the previous literature, the general approach towards impostor syndrome seems negative, focusing on the cognitive and emotional consequences of self-doubt (Maji, 2021; Paterson & Vincent-Akpu, 2021). Although the study by Arleo et al. (2021) suggests identifying the level of impostor syndrome presence, the attitude towards IS seems negative. Moreover, Tulshyan and Burey (2021) claim that IS is used as an umbrella term to describe feelings of discomfort, self-doubt, and mild anxiety in the workplace and is pathologized, especially for women leaders. Several factors can explain female leaders' positive or appreciative approach towards impostor syndrome. The first possible explanation is that a mild self-doubt is unavoidable at any stage of a professional trajectory. Instead of allowing self-distrust to defeat an individual, it is better to use this feeling as a magic wand that would help to hedge possible risks. The second possible explanation is that acknowledging and accepting the impostor syndrome facilitates overcoming it.

Moreover, the participants recommended being more rational at this stage since self-destructive emotions may complicate the acceptance process. The third possible explanation is that a person without impostor syndrome may not develop as a professional because they lack self-criticism. Therefore, doubting one's capability from time to time can be considered as something normal and healthy. In other words, to improve in certain aspects of life, one should question his or her abilities occasionally. However, it is important to bear in mind that when an individual experiences *persistent* self-doubt that makes them constantly suffer from it, the assistance of a mental health expert is needed.

Overall, it can be concluded that imposterous feelings are inevitable despite the position one holds, and it may reoccur at any stage of the career path. Therefore, instead of demonizing the feelings, it is recommended to use it for personal and professional development. This might be done through self-recognition, family and friends' support, and having a mentor or coach.

Several implications can be drawn from the present study. Reflecting on all findings encourages us to recommend shifting from negative connotations of impostor syndrome to positive ones. For instance, instead of considering impostor syndrome as a burden, it is better to acknowledge it as a driver and see its potential benefits in one's personal and professional growth. Therefore, this new understanding of the impostor syndrome should help to improve or reconsider existing theories on female leadership and impostor syndrome. Individuals could consider how the participants deal with impostor syndrome and what sort of instruments they use. This means that after detecting the severity of impostor syndrome, people experiencing it can apply one of the methods participants suggested.

However, there are several limitations to mention. A narrative inquiry aims to explore the lived experience in depth. Therefore, the major limitation is that by the nature of the narrative inquiry, the generalisation of outcomes to a larger population is not the main focus of this methodological approach. Another limitation of the study is that female leaders were self-aware about their mental health and followed psychotherapy. With the poor diversity of extent to which participants experienced impostor syndrome, the voices of individuals with severe consequences could not be included. Notwithstanding these limitations, the present paper contributes to existing knowledge of impostor syndrome by providing evidence from the Kazakhstani higher education context. Before this study, evidence of impostor syndrome was mainly from Global-North. Moreover, the current paper has provided a deeper insight into impostor syndrome through the prism of participants' lived stories. Their stories about experiencing impostor syndrome can be considered a significant input in developing female leadership. Research on impostor syndrome and female leadership is still scarce in the context of Kazakhstan. Numerous future research projects could be identified within these ten narratives. However, a natural progression of this work is to identify and analyse the evidence of impostor syndrome across various fields where females are underrepresented in leadership.

ENDNOTES

1. Adj. In layman terms, Krutaya means cool in Russian, but its connotation is more than just being cool.
2. Adverbial form of krutaya

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